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AUTHOR Roberts, David Harrill
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ABSTRACT

Of great concern among researchers is the effectiveness of holistic scoring, which is necessarily product-centered and decontextualized, in measuring writing quality, the mental processes necessary for writing, or teaching skill. The Committee on Teaching and Its Evaluation in Composition of the Conference on College Composition and Communication has made suggestions for shifting the focus of evaluation from the product to the process. Furthermore, it stresses the need and makes suggestions for viewing language teaching from a constructivist stance rather than from a reductionist position. The writing quality evaluations of much of the research in written composition, clearly more reductionist than constructivist, fail to take into account the purpose of the writer, the writer's audience, or the sociopolitical context of the writing act. Future research in writing should utilize the six evaluation instruments suggested by the committee that take into account the goals of both course and teacher, the background and preparation of students, and many other factors critical to the learning experience. Research in written composition should also consider language change over periods longer than a single academic term. Unfortunately, researchers today are caught between the expediency of experimental research and the completeness of naturalistic inquiry. One demands empirical inquiry based on the tenets of logical positivism, and the other requires a costly commitment to naturalistic inquiry based on the belief in a multiple reality. (HOD)

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Experimental Research in Written Composition:

A Critical View

David Harrill Roberts

Department of English
University of Southern Mississippi
Hattiesburg, MS 39406-5037
(601) 266-4320

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A recent article in **College Composition and Communication** raises serious questions about our "science consciousness" in teaching and research in composition[1]. Since the publication of **Research in Written Composition** nearly two decades ago, scores of classroom researchers have described and quantified writing samples, lexical choices, errors, T-units, clauses, sentences, and nearly everything else that is countable or measurable, in countless attempts to evaluate writing instruction, courses, and programs. Indeed, "empirical research" has become a paradigm for doctoral research. Yet, time after time, the results have been termed "not statistically significant," as in my own doctoral research.[2] Other times the experimental design was thought to be flawed in one or more ways. The reaction to such failure to discriminate among experimental outcomes is most commonly to call for more experimentation within this model, much in line with many recent doctoral studies.

But more recent speculation on the transmission and measurement of literacy calls that paradigm for educational research into question.[3] The limits of what can be discovered and understood through narrowly empirical research on writing are now being defined in more realistic terms,[4] and it may be that a broader research paradigm will prove more fruitful. Specifically, the effectiveness of holistic scoring is now being questioned by some researchers while others are calling for research within a naturalistic paradigm.

The effectiveness of holistic scoring and T-unit analysis are questionable measures of writing quality changes, especially over periods of time as short as one semester.[5] Grobe suggests that holistic scoring may be more influenced by essay length and correctness of spelling than by syntactic complexity, and that the scoring may be more influenced by vocabulary than anything else,[6] a suggestion corroborated by Neilson and Piche'.[7] Writing samples of college students at two West Virginia colleges further support the notion that essay length may influence holistic scoring. Of three groups of freshman writers responding to similar writing assignments, students enrolled in basic writing wrote the shortest essays (mean length, 157 words) and received the lowest holistic scores, with a mean score of 1.9 on a scale of 1 to 6. Composition I students wrote essays with a mean length of 272 words and received a mean holistic score of 3.2. The group receiving the highest mean holistic score, the Composition II students, also wrote the longest essays; they received a mean score of 4.4 for essays with a mean length of 427 words. The between-groups differences in holistic scores and in essay lengths were both statistically significant,[8] supporting the earlier findings of Freedman,[9] and Nold and Freedman[10] that the length of student essays has a definite influence on holistic scores. Utilizing the metaphor of a recent article by Robert Gorrell,[11] scoring essay quality by a measure heavily influenced by length is about as useful as judging the quality of Mulligan stew by the size of the pot.

But there is a concern greater than whether length, vocabulary, syntactic complexity, or spelling has the most influence on the holistic scores assigned by evaluators of writing samples. That

concern is whether holistic scoring, necessarily product-centered and de-contextualized, is an effective measure of writing quality, effectiveness of instruction, or anything other than how well a writing sample simulates an Idealized Text,[12] i.e., whether such a product-centered method of evaluation can be used to evaluate the mental processes necessary for writing. Mulligan stew is judged by its product, without regard for the context of its creation; furthermore, the making of a stew does not require the higher cortical functions composing an essay requires, for stew-making is largely a linear, left-brain activity performed on a finite inventory of ingredients in a context of little variation. The composing process, on the other hand, requires higher cortical functions of both hemispheres: holistic cognitive processes involving a nearly infinite number of possibilities in a context influenced by a wide number of factors.

In discussing the inadequacies of the rating method employed for judging writing quality for a recent study of writing quality, all of the raters complained that the evaluation techniques required product-centered evaluation based on an artificial rubric that, while developed specifically for the essay topics by prominent composition researchers, was inadequate for evaluating what the papers really deserved, based on what the raters perceived as the students' intentions within the writing context. One rater dropped from the study because he could not rate Themes ad Products. Another rater was unable to adhere to the strict rubric provided, so he failed to reach a level of inter-rater reliability acceptable for holistic scoring. The other two raters, experienced in blocking their subjective responses at holistic scoring sessions, attained a high inter-rater reliability by

adhering to the product-centered criteria of the rubric.

The purpose of thorough training for holistic scoring sessions is to induce agreement among the raters, agreement based on writing samples that represent the various scores allowed by the rubric, what Brannon and Knoblauch characterize as an Idealized Text. A further purpose is to prevent any consideration of context or environment of the writing act--a sort of context-stripping designed to further reduce rater variability. It is not possible, within what some have labeled the agricultural-botany paradigm,[13] to evaluate writing samples without first stripping the product from the context that produced it and then ignoring the writer's intention and objective. The product-centered evaluation of decontextualized writing samples is a fault of the research design of the past several decades, brought into being by our sincere desire to be scientific in our research. The result often is the superficial evaluation of surface detail variables, or, evaluations that don't evaluate what matters. The CCCC Committee on Teaching and Its Evaluation in Composition has made suggestions for shifting the perspective of our evaluations to the teaching process rather than the product,[14] suggestions for viewing language teaching from a constructivist stance rather than from a reductionist position.

In "A Holistic View of Language," Roger Shuy makes clear the distinction between the constructivist and the reductionist approaches to language. The reductionist view of language is "that learners learn best small things before large things and that by taking natural language apart and by cutting it into pieces, the learner can best benefit."[15] The constructivist view (or holistic view), on the

other hand, "prefers to see the elemental parts within a meaningful whole,"[16] integrating both language and sociolinguistic competence to achieve a communicative competence dependent upon both social and linguistic context for meaning. The writing quality evaluations of much of the research in written composition are clearly more reductionist than constructivist, failing to take into account the purpose of the writer, the writer's audience, and the socio-political context of the writing act under evaluation, which is precisely the point at which modern literary criticism and modern linguistics have consistently failed.[17] Until the variables of learning and rhetorical context are accounted for, much of the experimental research in composition will lack the "power" to produce meaningful results.[18] Perhaps further re-evaluations of holistic scoring and the popular quantitative measures are in order.

Future research in writing instruction and future evaluations of writing instruction and courses may well utilize the six evaluation instruments suggested by the CCCC Committee on Teaching and Its Evaluation in Composition.[19] The instruments take into consideration the goals of both course and teachers, the background and preparation of the students, and many other factors critical to the context of the learning experience. Even when quantitative analyses are desirable the suggested evaluations instruments will aid the interpretation of the statistics by providing valuable information about the context that created the quantifiable data. The CCCC Committee's instrument is more naturalistic than experimental, and for that reason alone is more suitable for evaluation of teacher and program effectiveness because, like the naturalist, it "sees reality as

context dependent rather than fixed and discoverable," as the experimentalist views the world.[20] Thus, the philosophical base for future research in written composition and for evaluation of teacher and program effectiveness should shift from positivism toward phenomenology, regardless of a recent admonition to utilize an empirically-developed evaluation instrument.[21]

Finally, future research in written composition should be expanded in time to consider language change over periods longer than a single academic term. But longitudinal studies are costly in both time and money, and doctoral students, especially, feel the pinch of both. So, the world remains divided, and there are still those who insist on high production, as pointed out by James Kinney, who quotes a reviewer for **Research in the Teaching of English** as encouraging the abandonment of naturalistic inquiry because experimental research gets faster results.[22]

James Kinney is not alone in his dismay, for doctoral students and other young scholars are caught between the expediency of experimental research and the completeness of naturalistic inquiry. Janet Emig sees the dichotomy in current inquiry paradigms as a matter of perception and "how we elect to define what is distinctly human about human life."[23] On the one hand is the expedience of de-contextualized experimental inquiry, empirical inquiry based on the tenets of logical positivism; and on the other hand is the high cost of a commitment to long-term naturalistic inquiry, naturalistic inquiry based on the existence of a multiple reality. Andrea Lunsford undertook a count of nouns in a large sample of writing by basic writers. Overwhelmed by her data, she wrote to Mina Shaughnessy,

shortly before the latter's death. Shaughnessy wrote back, "Do your word counts, but remember to listen to what your students are saying."[24]

Perhaps we need modes of inquiry that will allow us to listen to what our students are saying as well as to collect data. What is knowable is knowable in a number of ways, and that dictates that neither experimental nor naturalistic inquiry into the writing and writing instruction processes will be abandoned; instead, each will complement the findings of the other.

NOTES

[1]Ralph F. Voss, "Janet Emig's **The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders: A Reassessment," College Composition and Communication**, 34 (1983), 278-283.

[2]David H. Roberts, "Individualized Writing Instruction in Southern West Virginia Colleges: A Study of the Acquisition of Writing Fluency," Diss. Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 1982.

[3]CCCC Committee on Teaching and Its Evaluation in Composition, "Evaluating Instruction in Writing: Approaches and Instruments," **College Composition and Communication**, 33 (1982), 213-229; Janet Emig, "Inquiry Paradigms and Writing," **College Composition and Communication**, 33 (1982), 64-75; Maxine Hairston, "The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of Writing," **College Composition and Communication**, 33 (1982), 76-88; Susan Miller, "How Writers Evaluate Their Own Writing," **College Composition and Communication**, 33 (1982), 176-183; and Voss.

[4]Richard Lloyd-Jones, "What We May Become," **College Composition and Communication**, 33 (1982), 202-207.

[5]S. P. Witte and A. S. Davis, "The Stability of T-unit Length in the Written Discourse of College Freshmen: A Second Study," **Research in the Teaching of English**, 16 (1982), 71-84.

[6]C. Grobe, "Syntactic Maturity, Mechanics, and Vocabulary as Predictors of Quality Ratings," **Research in the Teaching of English**, 15 (1981), 75-85.

[7]L. Neilson and G. L. Piche', "The Influence of Headed

Nominal Complexity and Lexical Choice on Teachers' Evaluations of Writing," **Research in the Teaching of English**, 15 (1981), 65-73.

[8] Roberts, p. 95.

[9] S. W. Freedman, "How Characteristics of Student Essays Influence Teachers' Evaluations," **Journal of Educational Psychology**, 71 (1979), 328-338.

[10] E. W. Nold and S. W. Freedman, "An Analysis of Readers' Responses to Essays," **Research in the Teaching of English**, 11 (1977), 164-174.

[11] Robert M. Gorrell, "How to Make Mulligan Stew: Process and Product Again," **College Composition and Communication**, 34 (1983), 272-277.

[12] L. Brannon and C. H. Knoblauch, "On Students' Rights to Their Own Texts: A Model of Teacher Response," **College Composition and Communication**, 33 (1982), 157-166.

[13] James Kinney, "Composition Research and the Rhetorical Tradition," **Rhetoric Society Quarterly**, 10 (1980), 143-148.

[14] CCCC Committee on Teaching and Its Evaluation in Composition.

[15] Roger Shuy, "A Holistic View of Language," **Research in the Teaching of English**, 16 (1981), p. 105.

[16] Shuy, p. 103.

[17] Lester Faigley, "Review of **Linguistics, Stylistics, and the Teaching of Composition**, ed. by D. McQuade, **College Composition and Communication**, 33 (1982), 96-98.

[18] James Kinney, "The Rhetoric of Dismissing Differences," **Rhetoric Society Quarterly**, 10 (1980), 156-159.

[19]CCCC Committee on Teaching and Its Evaluation in Composition.

[20]Kinney, "Composition Research...", p. 144.

[21]Stephen P. Witte, John A. Daly, Lester Faigley, and William R. Koch, "An Instrument for Reporting Composition Course and Teacher Effectiveness in College Writing Programs," **Research in the Teaching of English**, 17 (1983), 243-261.

[22]Kinney, "Composition Research..."

[23]Emig, p. 73.

[24]Andrea Lunsford, "The Content of Basic Writers' Essays," **College Composition and Communication**, 31 (1980), 278-290.